



Gloster could be second state ‘Firewise Community’

By Ernest Herndon | [Enterprise-Journal](#)

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Gloster is poised to become Mississippi’s second “Firewise Community,” and Liberty may follow close behind. Both are located in the eighth “hottest” county in the state, according to a report by Firewise Communities/USA, a joint state and federal program designed to reduce the chances of fire. From July 1, 2005, to June 30, 2008, some 357 wildfires burned an estimated 3,865 acres in Amite County.

In Gloster, the fire department responded to eight building fires between Jan. 1, 2007, and Dec. 31, 2008, including nine structure fires and three vehicle fires.

The Firewise program will aim to reduce that.

“I think it’s one of the best things that Gloster has ever begun to try to do,” said town resident Sarah Jane Laramore, the “sparkplug” who got the program going locally. “And it will affect the whole county, because we are number eight for being a hot county and region, which means we have enormous fire problems.”

“And many of the things that can be done to reduce that are very simple,” Laramore said.

Earlier this year, Firewise coordinator Leslie G. “Opie” Blackwell of Philadelphia conducted an assessment of the town, assisted by resident Mabel Martin Williams.

“We did a survey of the town, he and I,” Williams said. “We drove all over town, looked at all of the houses, took pictures. It (Firewise) is a nice program, showing all the houses and what needs to be done.”

Blackwell presented his findings at a meeting last week.

“The community rated as a moderate hazard, which means it’s good in some respects but there’s room for improvement,” Blackwell said.

The Gloster Firewise board has until the end of August to decide whether to participate in the program. If so, Gloster will be the second town in the state to sign up, after Snow Lake Shores east of Holly Springs, Blackwell said.

Amite County Emergency Management Director Sam Walsh, who attended last week's meeting, said he'd like Liberty to sign up as well.

"I've appointed one of my firemen (Gary Steen) to get with Opie and try to do it with Liberty and get Liberty to be a Firewise community," Walsh said.

"This is something here that the public can get involved in, and I hope both communities can get involved."

Firewise is funded by grants from the U.S. Forest Service and is available to towns, communities and neighborhood associations. The communities must agree to provide the equivalent of \$2 per resident in volunteer fire-prevention efforts. They may qualify for grants to help with costs of meetings and fire prevention equipment.

The Gloster committee will meet soon to decide whether to go ahead with the program, which would include fire prevention awareness meetings, clean-up days and other measures to promote fire safety in town. "We are hoping to," Williams said. "I would just love to have a part in it."

Laramore is equally enthusiastic. "All it takes is cooperative citizens," she said. "The most meaningful thing is that everybody will learn."

Firewise provides a wealth of specific tips for reducing the risk of fire — common-sense practices that are often overlooked.

"I learned how easy a fire could start," Williams said, "about the shrubs that you have around your house that are easily caught, and the pine needles that fall on your house — you need to keep all of that off — and leaves, pecan leaves, whatever is on top of your house that's easy to burn."

All streets need signs and houses need numbers for quick location by firefighters, and narrow streets need places to turn around, Williams pointed out.

"I'm going on the serious Firewise way by putting up hardware cloth with lattice on top of it," Laramore said of her own home. "Chipmunks and squirrels will leave my electrical wires alone because they can't get to them."

Said Walsh, "We sometimes tend to forget what's in the surrounding around the house that could potentially be dangerous, things like bringing the wood fence up to the edge of your house, having large shrubbery up to the edge of the house, not keeping your grass cut. There are things that we overlook every day."

Getting residents involved in fire prevention can take some of the load off volunteer firefighters, who are stretched thin during dry season, he said.

"Sometimes people think of volunteers as workers, when everybody can be a volunteer, and the greatest thing that people can do is keep things around their house clean and clear, and it would save us a lot of structure fires," Walsh said.

The Gloster assessment was developed by the Mississippi Forestry Commission Forest Information/Outreach Division in partnership with Gloster Mayor Billy Johnson, Fire Chief Terry W. Boss, Sr., former aldermen Rebecca Anderson and Jane Bell Martin, homeowners Williams and Laramore, Mississippi Forestry Commission Amite County employees Charlotte and Ronnie Reynolds, Amite County Emergency Management Director Sam Walsh and State Fire Coordinator Larry Barr.

On the Net: www.firewise.org/usa